DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 519 CG 027 911

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TITLE The Effects of Divorce on Children: A Review of the Literature.
PUB DATE [97]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Behavior Problems; Child Welfare; *Children; *Divorce; Elementary Secondary Education; *Literature Reviews; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Influence; Sex Differences; *Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

Divorce is a major life stressor and is a lengthy process which often results in long-term emotional and psychological damage to children. The effects of divorce on children are explored in this review of the literature. Some studies indicate that the preschool aged population is the most vulnerable to divorce, whereas others posit that no age differences exist. Children of divorce were found to exhibit both internalizing problems, such as emotional difficulties like sadness, fear, and grief, and externalizing problems, such as aggression, lower educational achievement, and increased absenteeism. Divorce was also found to have gender-specific impacts. For boys, aggression was more common, and for girls, increased depression was more often reported. Additionally, divorce was found to have a profound impact on the parent-child relationship, possibly due to the lack of social support among family members. The impact of divorce for two-thirds of children was limited to two years, but numerous studies found a host of long-term effects, such as lesser educational attainment. The most crucial factor relating to the negative consequences of divorce is parental discord; family conflict was the most significant mediating variable in the effects of divorce on children. (RJM)

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Running head: EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

The Effects of Divorce on Children: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

The present literature review looks at the effects of divorce on children. Some studies indicate that the preschool aged population is the most vulnerable, while others insist that no age differences exist. Children of divorce were found to exhibit both internalizing problems, such as emotional difficulties such as sadness, fear, and grief, and externalizing problems, such as, aggression, lower educational achievement, and increased absenteeism. Divorce was also found to have gender-specific impacts. For boys aggression was more common and for girls increased depression was more often reported. Additionally, divorce was found to have a profound impact on the parent-child relationship, possibly due to the lack of social support between family members. The impact of divorce for two-thirds of children was limited to two years, but numerous studies found a host of long-term effects such as lesser educational attainment. Family conflict was found to be the most significant mediating variable in the effects of divorce on children.

Divorce has become an enormous concern for the well-being of our children (Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994). The increased concern mirrors the rapidly rising divorce rate over the past several decades (Long & Forehand, 1987) According to current trends, it is likely that 40% of marriages will end in divorce (Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, Kiernan, Robins, Morrison, & Teitler, 1991; Shaw, 1991). Conservative estimates indicate that two out of five divorces will involve children (Cherlin et. al; Fine, Moreland, & Schwebel, 1983; Shaw) while others predict that as much as 70% of marital ruptures will encompass young ones (Kurtz & Derevensky, 1993). Each year, greater than one million American youngsters are caught up in parental divorce (Runyon & Jackson, 1988). With so many divorces taking place, many of which involve children, it is imperative that educators understand its impact on children (Adams, Miller, Reavis, & Reglin, 1989; Shaw).

Divorce is a major life stresser and can be characterized as a significant transition period regardless of age (Aro & Palosaari, 1992; Fine et. al, 1983; Kalter, 1987). It is a lengthy and stressful process which often results in long term emotional and psychological damage to children (Koel, Clark, Straus, Whitney, & Hauser, 1994) and has a significant effect on behavior (Adams et. al, 1989). Long and Forehand (1987) suggest that the incidence of maladaptive behavior among children from divorced families is high. The process of divorce extends backwards temporally into the pre-divorce period to encompass family conditions, which may include spousal discord and parent-child relationships (Kalter). The ways in which parents and children relate to each other are seriously impacted by a divorce due to changed perceptions of each other (Wallerstein, 1985).

With so many students impacted by divorce, it is imperative that educators are aware of the impact of parental separation on children, including interpersonal struggles, social conflicts, and mood changes (Shaw; Adams et. al).

Though some research has indicated that no significant differences in the effects of divorce on children were based on age (Fine et. al, 1983), the majority of studies show that the preschool aged population is the most vulnerable (Shaw, 1991). Shaw points out that those children whose parents separated before they were age six had more adjustment problems than those who were older at the time of separation. Runyon and Jackson (1988) point out that when one parent departs and the child is young, he/she will often fear the abandonment of the other parent. As a result of this fear, young children may refuse to go to once pleasurable places such as nursery school and may become tearful and clinging. These children may also become overly concerned with not being lovable or loved, and may feel guilty about the divorce, and as a result, blame themselves. This blame, in turn, may result in a longing for parental reunification. Spigelman, Spigelman, and Englesson (1994) found that children over age six who had experienced divorce two years or more ago were the best adapted, demonstrating lower levels of anxiety, aggression, and distress. Poorer communication, greater distance, less affection and warmth, and generally less positive feelings all characterize the parent-child relationship when the divorce involves a young child (Fine et. al).

Research indicates five variables that play a role in the effects of divorce on children. They are: pre-divorce family condition; pre-divorce child adjustment; post-divorce parental

relationship; age of child at the time of the divorce; and divorce related socioeconomic changes (Fine et. al, 1983). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) indicate that most of the effects of divorce can be observed within one year after the separation. Additionally, effects of divorce on children can generally be placed into two categories: internalizing effects and externalizing effects, though not all children experience either to the same extent (Spigelman et. al, 1994). Cherlin et. al (1991) define in a British study externalizing effects as behavior issues, such as aggression and disobedience, and internalizing effects as emotional issues, such as depression and anxiety.

Kalter (1987) pointed out that aggressiveness and anti-social behavior is common among children of divorce. Shaw (1991) asserts these children show increased aggression towards peers and defiance towards teachers, and Wallerstein (1985) adds that they exhibit more absenteeism. However, latency aged children demonstrated no open aggression towards parents (Oppawsky, 1991). Oppawsky found that 86% of children of divorce experienced a fall in academic achievement. Long and Forehand (1987) reveal children from single-parent homes demonstrate higher rates of absenteeism and truancy, have lower achievement scores, and higher drop-out rates than those from two-parent families. Cherlin et. al (1991) confirm these findings, stating that children of divorce experience more emotional and behavioral problems and fare less well in school than children of intact families. Runyon and Jackson (1988) indicate that divorce may disrupt a child's ability to freely participate in the learning process, as evidenced by a decline in academic achievement, less time on task, an inability to concentrate, and increased distractibility. Shaw opines that

children of divorce will show behavioral problems at home and school after a divorce possibly in an attempt to cope with systemic changes, frequency of contact with the nonresidential parent, child-rearing practices, and the post-divorce adjustment of the caretaker parent. Kurtz and Derevensky (1993) illustrate that they demonstrate lower levels of cognitive self-efficacy while displaying higher levels of athletic self-efficacy than did peers from non-divorced families. Furthermore, children of divorce have a variety of somatic complaints, sleep disturbances, night terrors, regression, tics, and enuresis (Oppawsky; Wallerstein), and younger children displayed increased obstinate behavior, masturbation, and aggression (Oppawsky).

Children of divorce exhibit a host of emotional difficulties and fare worse than children of intact families (McKee, 1992). Spigelman et. al (1994), Cebollero, Cruise, and Stollack (1985), and Oppawsky (1991) assert that they experience pain, anger, sadness, depression, anguish, sorrow, fear, crying, grief, and deterioration in their overall functioning in comparison to children of intact families. They have a fear of abandonment and fears of impending disaster, and are suspicious, hyper-alert, and emotionally constricted (Wallerstein, 1985). Additionally, they have a sense of being different from other children, limiting them in their friendships (Cebollero et. al). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that five years after separation, greater than two-thirds of children longed for parental reconciliation and Oppawsky identified 80% of his/her participants as longing for parental reunification. In spite of this, when children were asked what they would think if their parents remarried, they expressed concerns over parental fighting and arguing and recalled their own

unhappiness during the time of divorce (Cebollero et. al). Studies have found that divorce also has numerous gender-specific impacts on children.

In a British study, Cherlin et. al (1991) found that girls scored lower on reading and math achievement tests than did girls from intact families. In a separate Finnish study, adolescent girls were found to exhibit greater delinquency, drug use, and running away and reported more somatic complaints than did either boys of divorce or children of non-divorced families (Aro & Palosaari, 1992). Later on, at age 22, 17.45% of girls of divorce suffered from depression, compared to 11.5% among girls of non-divorced parents. Kalter (1987) agrees, indicating that lower self-esteem, preconscious sexual activity, and greater delinquency are all more prevalent among girls of divorce, and may occur years after the family break-up. Kalter suggests that girls experience the emotional loss of the father as a personal rejection which reduces or eliminates interaction with a man who is caring, loving, and attentive. He indicates that "the continuous sense of being valued and loved as a female seems an especially key element in the development of the conviction that one is indeed femininely lovable" without which a "girl's sense of being valued as a female does not seem to thrive" (p. 597). Though depression is more common as an immediate effect of divorce, long-term effects of divorce indicate that men experience depression more than women who have divorced parents (Bianchi, 1987).

Shaw (1991) discovered that boys are more affected by divorce than their female counterparts and Guidubaldi and Perry (1985) assert that boys may be more vulnerable than girls to family disruptions. Shaw maintains that boys from divorced families are

at an increased risk for anti-social and aggressive behavior, whereas girls are not, and that boys are less popular among their peers. Aro and Palosaari (1992) report that boys had more conflict with authority, possibly as a result of the increased aggression manifested in oppositionally defiant behavior. Kalter (1987) opines that increased aggression is attributable to feelings of abandonment and rejection when the mother becomes emotionally invested in social relationships and work after the marital separation. Added to this is inter-parental hostility, into the middle of which the children are brought. According to Kalter, this may result in intense long-lasting anger in the children.

Boys, more than girls, are placed to live with their opposite sex parent (Shaw, 1991). Kalter (1987) and Shaw point out that 90% of custodies go to the mother. Shaw found that children living with the opposite sex parents are less well adjusted, and Heatherington (1986) and Shaw discovered that mothers were less affectionate with their male children, attend less well to their sons' needs, and view them in a negative manner.

Kalter (1987) suggests that boys who do not have regular and close relations with their fathers, "are more vulnerable to encountering difficulties related to the development of a stable and valued internal sense of masculinity" (p. 595). According to Kalter, this is evidenced by the inhibition of assertiveness, reduced control of impulses, and decreased academic performance. In spite of this, he found that as time passes, fathers are increasingly less visible to their youngsters. He determined that divorce is more negative for boys than girls, especially in cognitive development and personality adjustment.

Divorce has a profound impact on the parent-child relationship. Data suggest that in families of divorce, there is a lack of social support between family members (Kurtz & Derevensky, 1993). Fine et. al (1983) concluded three findings of the effects of divorce on the parent-child relationship. First, that divorced children viewed the father-child relationship less positively than the mother-child relationship; second, that pre-divorce quality of life is significantly related to the perceived post-divorce father-child relationship but not to the mother-child relationship; and lastly, that both boys and girls viewed their relationships with their fathers negatively, and that boys viewed their relationships with their mothers more cynically than did their female counterparts. Furthermore, Children of divorce are sometimes cast into a psychological role required by the parent because he/she is troubled, needy or depressed (Wallerstein, 1985). Fine et. al (1983) assert that children may trust parents less and may be angry at them while mothers may displace anger from conflicts with the fathers onto children, possibly explaining why fathers of divorce are perceived less positively than those in intact families. However, 10 years after the divorce, mothers were also viewed less positively by their children. Finally, boys tended to view their relationships with their mothers more negatively than did their female counterparts.

Long and Forehand (1987) point out that most of the negative effects of divorce disappear within two years following the divorce, and Runyon and Jackson (1988) suggest that the majority of children are able to overcome the trauma of divorce as they learn to live with it. Though for two-thirds of children the impact of divorce may be limited to two years following the

separation (Kurtz & Derevensky, 1993), research indicates many long term effects of divorce including social, emotional, and behavioral problems that can first appear years after the separation (Aro & Palosaari, 1992; Kalter, 1987). In a study by Aro and Palosaari, completion of a high-school education was less common and job loss and smoking and alcohol use was more prevalent among Finnish adult children of divorce. Additionally, school performance was generally less, and boys and girls alike less often planned a continuation of their studies in high school. Wadsworth, Maclean, Kuh, and Rodgers (1990) in a British study found that parental separation puts children at risk for lesser educational attainment and that delinquency was higher among those boys and girls whose parents had divorced. Kalter (1987) indicates that the legacy of divorce for children is both emotional pain and developmental disruption. For adult children of divorce, Kalter asserts that they may have difficulty forming and maintaining, "mutually enhancing heterosexual relationships" (p. 589) and Glenn and Kramer (1985) report that they have more difficulty with intimate relationships and have a greater inclination towards divorce. This is supported by Kalter, who maintains that children who were 16 or less when the divorce occurred experience higher divorce rates. Another study found that parental divorce is associated with depressive and psychosomatic symptoms in Swiss adults (Binder, Dobler-Mikola, & Angst, 1981). Aro and Palosaari maintain that at age 22 adult men of divorce reported slightly more somatic complaints, although among females no significant difference was found. Fortunately, Bianchi (1987) reported that no negative attitudes towards marriage were found and Aro and Palosaari observed that the

majority of children of divorce were well adapted as young adults.

The most crucial factor relating to the negative consequences of divorce is parental discord (Aro & Palosaari, 1992). Long and Forehand (1987) assert that, "the most important mediating variable associated with divorce and child adjustment is conflict between parents" (p. 294). Research indicates that parental conflict, as opposed to parental separation, is the most important factor in post divorce adjustment. Long and Forehand support this citing that children from non-conflictual divorced families demonstrate fewer problems than do children from high-conflict ruptured families. Kurtz and Derevensky (1993) claim that conflict is a predictor of disequilibrium in the family and parental conflict, instead of divorce, results in the negative adaptations of the child. Shaw (1991) asserts that inter-parental conflict has been consistently identified as a major source of behavior problems across a wide array of family structures and settings. Research indicates that post-divorce inter-parental conflict is associated with increased behavioral problems, as compared to those children of low or non-conflictual divorced families (Long & Forehand). Cherlin et. al (1991) opine that much of what is considered as the effects of divorce is visible before the parental separation, for example, a dysfunctional family or the parents have serious problems evidenced through frequent fighting, which often leads to divorce. Long and Forehand suggest that behavioral problems demonstrated by children of divorce are often noticeable some time before the divorce. Additionally, families with less inter-parental conflict demonstrated better relationships with their children after the divorce than did those with more conflict (Kurtz & Derevensky,

1993). Long and Forehand assert that low inter-parental conflict is associated with less severe post-divorce problems. Kurtz and Derevensky add that children often feel responsible for the parental discord. Because of this, they often feel guilty and blame themselves after the divorce. One indicator of considerable and enduring inter-parental conflict is relitigation (Koel et. al, 1994). Litigation is an index of inter-parental conflict and/or poor communication, and is a consistent predictor of poor post-divorce adjustment, low self-esteem, and or behavior problems for children.

When conflicts are not present, relitigation is rare (Koel et. al, 1994). Koel et. al discovered that 41% of divorced couples relitigate, often repeatedly, and over one-half of all relitigations will involve children. During periods of relitigation, which are often lengthy, children have no relief from the divorce process, parents remain under stress and are unsettled, and children remain uncertain about the future. Wallerstein (1985) aptly refers to children of relitigation as "Children of Armageddon" (p. 120). Runyon and Jackson (1988) suggest that if, "the parents are involved in a bitter, raging battle filled with accusations, the child may be enlisted to become aligned with one parent" (p. 102). Inter-parental conflict, the relationship with each parent, and the diminished family income all play a role in post-divorce adjustment (Shaw, 1991).

A child's relationship with both parents, the parents' relationship with each other, the child's age at the time of divorce, the recency of the divorce, and the child's own feelings and attitudes about the divorce all contribute to post-divorce

adjustment (Spigelman et. al, 1994). Though Spigelman et. al found that the relationship with the father was a major factor contributing to post-divorce adjustment, Furstenberg, Peterson, Nord, and Zill (1983) found that 50% of children did not see their fathers in the past year while only 16.4% reported to see them once per week or more when the mother was the custodial parent. Another study found that with the passage of time, fathers visited their children less (Fine et. al, 1983). Five years after the divorce, only 30% of the participants described having a nurturing relationship with their fathers. In comparison, 13% of girls who were living with their fathers had not seen their mothers within the last year and 31% of them reported weekly visitations. Furthermore, Spigelman et. al ascertain that those with poor relations with their fathers felt anxious and apathetic towards them. However, a satisfactory relationship with the father is not by itself sufficient to ensure positive post-divorce adjustment.

Divorce will directly or indirectly touch nearly all American children. The effects it leaves in its wake are numerous and demand understanding. A wide array of emotional and behavioral issues can be understood within the context of parental separation. Increased acting-out behaviors, aggression and oppositional defiance, a decline in academic achievement, increased absenteeism and truancy, lesser educational attainment, depression or sadness, and anger are common indicators of parental divorce and inter-parental conflict. Additionally, research indicates that many effects of divorce persist over a number of years. Some studies show that adult-children of divorce have more somatic complaints, experience a higher rate of job loss, and use alcohol more frequently. It is imperative that educators recognize

and understand these clues to provide assistance, support, or referral to the school counselor as appropriate.

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